

# Academic Librarian Self-Image in Lore

## How Shared Stories Convey and Define our Sense of Professional Identity

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### Introduction

At one point or another, we have all shared stories, jokes, and maybe even gossip with our colleagues at work. The desire to connect verbally is a unifying characteristic of humans from all cultures and backgrounds. We interact with each other regularly, and through these informal interactions, we establish cultural norms, shared values, and a sense of group identity. Sometimes we converse just to be polite, about things like the weather, our pets, or our weekend activities, but in many cases, the things that we say can be meaningfully analyzed in terms of subtextual messages. Like the members of any group, academic librarians communicate concepts that they find significant via cautionary tales, depictions of heroic or shrewd librarians, and jokes about problems that we see in the profession. The stories that academic librarians find worthy of repetition provide direct insight into our self-perceptions and into the image we would like to extend to the public. The recollections and stories of 31 academic librarians and library science students form the basis for this study of themes in librarian informal communication, with additional support from librarian-generated content on the open Web.

The formal term for much of the aforementioned shared information is *folklore*. Folklore studies, known as *folkloristics*, consider the informal com-

munication and belief systems of communities, also known as *folk groups*. Folk groups (and folklore) can spring from geographic proximity, shared interests, familial ties, shared professions, or shared interests.<sup>1</sup> Though we don't often refer to it by its formal name, most of us encounter folklore daily. We repeat or repost urban legend e-mails about tricky criminals or Facebook privacy scandals, we avoid walking under ladders or going out on Friday the 13th, and we laugh at jokes heard around the water cooler. Stories, legends, jokes, superstitions, rituals, and traditions are all types of folklore. Folklore is such an ingrained part of the human experience that we often do not notice it, but it occurs across all cultures. Folklorist Alan Dundes notes that the primary aim of the folklorist is to ask "fundamental questions as to why a given item of folklore was created in the first place, or why it continues to be told or performed."<sup>2</sup> Via these questions, analysts can glean much about a folk group's respective fears, ideals, and values. Folklore scholar Robin Croft succinctly summarizes the import of folklore in our culture: "The oral tradition has long been studied by social psychologists and cultural anthropologists for the insights it can provide: folklore both mirrors and shapes the anxieties, fears, hopes and understandings of societies and of groups within it."<sup>3</sup> According to eminent folklorists Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, "Phenomena become folklore because other *individuals besides their creators* find them meaningful and subsequently *behave in ways that enable them to generate those phenomena anew*" (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Often, the source of folk stories is said to be "a friend of a friend,"<sup>5</sup> and librarian folklore is no exception; the veracity of the claims is insignificant because factuality is not the point of folklore. The point is the transmission of the underlying message, and, secondarily, the general entertainment of the listener or reader.

Researchers have explored the folklore and superstitions of a variety of professions, and there is a fairly sizable body of work related specifically to the folklore of academic institutions. Most notable are the works *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Campus Life* by Simon J. Bronner and *The Folklore of Academe* by J. Barre Toelken.<sup>6</sup> In these two works, Bronner and Toelken explore some of the most common student and faculty folk themes in institutions of higher education (including the pervasive

"15-minute rule" applied by students left waiting for a late professor, hazing rituals, and traditional drinking games). Though the folklore of college students and teaching faculty has been observed and documented, little attention has been paid by publishing writers to the folklore of academic library workers, and no one has addressed how the folklore of librarians speaks to our desired and perceived self-image. The most relevant previous study was conducted by Stacey Hathaway-Bell for *American Libraries*, wherein Hathaway-Bell focuses on urban legends, a particular type of folklore, in public and academic libraries.<sup>7</sup>

The collection of folklore obtained for this study reveals the shared beliefs and values of academic librarians as a folk group. The lore illuminates a handful of striking trends: attention to our core values of access, education and learning, the public good, professionalism, and patient service;<sup>\*</sup> desire to be taken seriously as professionals; concern over the continued viability of the profession in the face of rapid technological and cultural changes; fears about behaving inappropriately or violating cultural norms in the workplace; and concern over the general dangers and trials inherent in public service. The lore of librarians evidences a desire to preserve information access for everyone, but the necessity of working with diverse populations requires a clear and specific skill set. Often, aspects of that skill set are passed along through word-of-mouth (or social media) lore rather than via formal training manual. When considered together, the themes of these stories say a lot about the holistic "librarian image" that we perceive and want to cultivate.

## Research Methods and Editorial Note

Respondents were recruited via a variety of methods between 2010 and 2013. Some were approached via snowball sampling because they were known to have previously shared or created jokes, narratives, or other folklore. Those individuals suggested others who might make good interviewees. The authors also contacted four electronic mailing lists for master's students in library and information science to recruit current students, in order

\* All of these values match up to the American Library Association's Core Values of Librarianship, which is available on the ALA website: [www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues).

to get a feel for how newcomers are being indoctrinated by current members of the profession. Most interviews were conducted orally, either in person or via Skype, but some were conducted via e-mail. Respondents were asked to answer a series of semi-structured questions about their indoctrination experiences, stories or jokes that they had heard or repeated, and legends from their libraries. Respondents often did not answer all of the questions because they reported having no related stories to share, and the questionnaire was fluid to help respondents feel comfortable speaking about a variety of topics. Librarians and library science students from 19 unique colleges and universities were interviewed. In some cases, several individuals from the same institution were interviewed to trace how stories grow and change through repetition to better deliver didactic or cautionary messages.

To preserve readability in spoken interview transcript excerpts, the authors have removed nonessential instances of "filler" words such as *like*, *um*, and *ah*. In instances where sections were omitted from the taped interview, the omission is marked as [section omitted]. Editorial comments have been enclosed in brackets. The names and institutions of respondents have been eliminated and replaced with generic placeholders in brackets.

The 31 transcripts and additional web content included in this study were analyzed via a system of theme identification and categorization: the primary categories explored were indoctrination tales, jokes, games, cautionary tales, hero tales, patron-nicknaming conventions, and behavior-governing stories. (In some cases, a single anecdote fit more than one of these categories. In those cases, the dominant category was chosen for organizational clarity.) This paper focuses on those tales, jokes, legends and the web content that emphasize librarian concerns over self and public perception of the profession and of library spaces. Each section includes an explanation of the type of folklore, illustrative quotes, and an analysis of trends and potential meanings. Due to space limitations, not all quotes could be included, so many are summarized and reported in aggregate.

## Indoctrination Tales and Jokes

At some point, every one of us was new to the field of librarianship. Our early days in a new profession are often marked by collegially shared folk

stories, and these stories are often remarkably similar regardless of library type or location. Many librarians will talk animatedly about how they were prepared for work in a new library with tales of the most colorful regular patrons or with wry commentary on the types of questions they should expect to receive. These stories are used to welcome and prepare newcomers by bracing them for the potential perils of working with patrons. In many cases, they also communicate institutional norms of acceptable librarian responses and behavior. Since these stories are heard in an important professional transition point, they are often strong memories.

One of the more common message themes imparted to new librarians relates to the types of questions asked at the reference desk—specifically, the prevalence of overly simple or impossibly difficult queries. Librarians repeat customary warnings that most questions will be directional in nature or that patrons will unwittingly present misinformation as fact. In some variations, students quickly become bored or irate when the librarian cannot meet all requests immediately. One interviewee had this to say:

Patrons often ask questions such as, "I'm looking for a book—I don't know the title, but it's got a blue cover. No, I don't know the author either." Sometimes they'd have a very, very vague description of its contents, or sometimes they'd know vaguely what section of the library or shelf they think they last saw it in, possibly years ago.... I've actually been asked variations of this question in the past. I've also seen it in a video about librarian careers made in the 1940s, I think. [section omitted] I always feel like there's a bit of affection mixed in with the frustration when librarians joke about this—it does seem to indicate that the patron has an almost supernatural confidence in us, to expect us to find what they need with so little information!

Second, of course the classic librarian joke is about how much time we spend dealing with staplers. Pointing out where they are, fixing them, refilling them.... "I got a master's degree for this?" is the usual tone of these. And I'd say a variation is how much time we spend with printers, or pointing out where the bathrooms are. —Respondent 1



### Another respondent stated

Students are either too intimidated or too lazy to come to the reference desk. Instead they will message the librarian through the chat tool even though they are within sight of the reference desk. Students are not willing to try alternative research methods, such as looking at print indexes, starting with a reference source, locating a bibliography on their topic, etc., even if that research method would be easier to use than keyword searching. Students want to be able to cross search all of the library holdings just like Google [when asked reference interview questions]."... The student looks clearly perturbed. You have apparently proven yourself to be worthless in answering what the student perceives to be a simple question. —Respondent 4

Tales and anecdotes like these prepare new professionals and highlight the fears of the speaker. As noted by both respondents, they often reflect sadness regarding the decline of traditional reference questions and a sense of pride that librarians are often able to solve difficult questions even with insufficient information. This kind of story has a clear practical application, but also highlights two concerns:

- that librarians are perceived only as purveyors of basic information, and
- that we are viewed as increasingly irrelevant in the age of easy Google searching.

A different respondent made this relevant comment:

Yes, the questions have become rather simplified, and I feel it's reflective of well ... of No Child Left Behind, and just the closure of school libraries. So, as a result, you know, a lot of these kids who I see—and I've been doing this as an academic librarian for a little over eight years now—I just see them not able to formulate any questions and I think the availability of Google makes them approach whatever they come across in their un-

dergraduate classes and in some cases even graduate classes and ... so their questions subsequently become very simple.

—Respondent 30

Another common indoctrination story thread covers norms for handling needy patrons. Every interviewee who was asked about their interactions with patrons had stories about time-consuming individuals, and most of these patrons had been given simple monikers that librarians used among themselves. In many cases, respondents noted that the monikers were widely known among most public services staff. Several respondents expressed guilt about having assigned names to certain patrons, but felt that the names were sometimes necessary for communicating about problem patrons with other library employees.

The following set of quotations came from three different librarians who worked, at the time of the interviews, at the same institution. All of them were familiar with a single time-consuming individual to whom they referred as "Baby Bird." No one could pinpoint the genesis of the name.

"Baby Bird" was the nickname given to an elderly, mild mannered intellectual fellow. [section omitted] I still see him in the library. He'll come and say "Hello [Jane]." He was given the name because he always wanted you to do his searches. No matter how many times you showed him how to use [the catalog] or whatever database he was using, he would, I think, pretend not to remember how to use it. —Respondent 23

\* \* \*

Well, he was Baby Bird before I even got there, so he's been Baby Bird for over eight years. And he was, I was told that he was Baby Bird because whenever he'd come up to the desk, people felt like they had to feed him by hand essentially, the answers—that he was just trying to get you to do his work for him, and that you'd tell him to do something and then he'd come back the next day or a little while later and ask the same question, which is kind of unfair, since he doesn't speak English

as a first language, and probably eight years ago that was probably even more pronounced. —Respondent 5

\* \* \*

The other patron that I can think of [section omitted] was Baby Bird. And this was when I worked here about ten years ago [2001]. I don't know how many people referred to him by this nickname, but one librarian mentioned him by nickname or used this nickname in reference to this patron, and in my mind anyway, it immediately caught on because it seemed very apt. This was an older gentleman who would come up to the reference desk regularly, and he would ask for help with very very basic library searching processes, and he was a regular user of the library, in fact, still is. [section omitted] We called him this because he would come to the reference desk and ask for some very basic search help, and he was always very polite and very grateful but completely baffled and seemed completely helpless by—with the process of doing research. [section omitted] After a certain amount of time and when you know you and your colleagues have shown this person how to do the same thing over and over again, it becomes more tempting to be a little bit judgmental about it, I guess. That's why I do feel a little bad about the nickname, but it just seems too apt because it really felt like he was playing up the helplessness a great deal in order to get people to do his work for him, and that was my very uncharitable impression of him after a time. —Respondent 1

None of the interviewees expressed ire with "Baby Bird," though some had a tone of affectionate mild frustration. Rather, they found that his regular appearances at the reference desk necessitated some clear way to reference him as an individual. The concept of the needy patron appeared in many more stories. These patron descriptions are, in one way, simple anecdotes, but they also highlight our concern that our time as helpers is sometimes taken advantage of and that we have little recourse to avoid those patrons who monopolize more than their fair share of time either out of laziness or



a lack of understanding of libraries. When repeated, tales like these serve to solidify our self-identity as patient (and sometimes long-suffering) helpers of more difficult individuals.

Some people also spoke about having been indoctrinated with stories from the "old days," or with stories or jokes about ineffective managers. In this example, both of those concepts are present:

Another librarian here [section omitted] talks about the culture of this library before like, say 1990. And it was very rigid in the sense that it was almost like how lawyers need to account for their time in 15 minute blocks. He said that you would have to do the same thing back in the '70s and '80s under this dean.... I don't know how true that is, but I've heard it from a couple different people that it was a very rigid, a very ... there wasn't a lot of autonomy, and I think he described it almost as big brother-ish. I've heard that phrase from a couple of people about the olden days. And interestingly, I heard that at [another university where I was employed] about a former dean as well, so it may be a cultural shift that's happened over time in libraries, just the accounting for your day to day activity and the way it's done, that seems to be something that's changed and that people talk about. —Respondent 3

In this story, the "old days" are spoken of as a time of oppression. This story could be entirely factual, or it could be a sort of tall tale, wherein the facts have been "exaggerated to the limits of credibility or beyond in order to reveal emotional truths, to awaken [the] audience, to exorcise fears, to define and bind a social group."<sup>8</sup> Either way, in this scenario, the story informs newer hires that they now have improved freedom at work, at least in some ways. In situations wherein a work environment has become toxic or otherwise dysfunctional, library employees may find that their "old days" folklore highlights idyllic elements of the past, rather than negative ones.

Many readers may recognize another theme from the story about rigid time accounting—the theme that librarians' roles as professionals or faculty members are regularly under attack and that librarians must defend their autonomy. Librarians' faculty status is a hotly contested topic in aca-

demic libraries, so perceived attempts to diminish the prestige of librarianship through micromanagement is generally viewed as undesirable.

The theme of oppressive management was reflected in another story from a librarian who currently serves as a teaching faculty member for a master of library science program. She described having heard complaints about creative oppression from a large number of her students:

Students think library directors don't encourage thinking outside the box—that they don't want creativity. They sometimes feel discouraged from already having worked in libraries, and it's not one or two students—my students say every semester that they're bothered by administration. There seems to be a disconnect there. —Respondent 14

The pervasive concern regarding professional stifling of academic librarians by management is also reflected in jokes online. The following two lightbulb jokes have been shared repeatedly on librarian-hosted sites on the Internet. Each highlights mild scorn regarding managers' unwillingness to deviate from documented procedure and the perception that they are likely to overplan for even the simplest of tasks. Both jokes carry the message that management is stifling and red-tape-heavy and that academic libraries tend to complete work (or, perhaps, not complete it) via an overabundance of committees.

Q. How many library system managers does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. All of them, as the manual was lost in the last move (or flood).

\* \* \*

Q. How many library managers does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. At least one committee and a lightbulb strategy focus meeting and plan.

The same concern over a perceived reduction in the professional status of librarians appears in a third variation of the lightbulb joke.

**Q:** How many academic librarians does it take to change a lightbulb?

**A:** Just five. One changes the lightbulb while the other four form a committee and write a letter of protest to the Dean, because after all, changing lightbulbs IS NOT professional work!

The prevalence of jokes and stories like these shows that librarians continue to feel significant concern over their professional identity, but the joke delivery mode implies that the self-mockery is affectionate in tone. Lightbulb jokes have been described as "a whimsical meditation on the ways Americans make social decisions and get things done,"<sup>9</sup> and these examples are no exception. Folklorist Judith Kerman notes that they began largely as taunts of groups that the joke teller viewed as outsiders, but, as is the case with these jokes, they grew more commonly to poke fun at the teller's own professional, social, or ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup>

## Cautionary and Hero Tales

Another custom in the folklore of many groups is the cautionary tale, and librarians share them in abundance. Cautionary tales are similar to indoctrination tales in that they are a type of informal training and community-building exercise, but they include an added element of danger or warning. The point of these stories is to help the listener to feel prepared and protected against frightening events or individuals, or alternatively, to spur action by inspiring fear or anger. In some cases, cautionary tales conclude with an inspiring heroic response from a library employee who saves the day with assertiveness, sleuthing skills, or a cool head and a quick wit.

As public servants, librarians deal with a wide variety of patrons, so it is inevitable that some of those patrons will pose a physical threat or be generally disruptive. Library workers often recall and pass along informal tales of eccentric individuals and potentially harmful behaviors to alert others to the potential perils of working with the public. In some cases these stories

die out, but in other cases they grow, change, and become widely known not just in the library where they took place, but in other libraries and institutions. This mutation and continuation is a classic feature of folklore.

*Here is one example from a library science student, who heard it from a fellow student during a class discussion:*

We were talking about library policies, and how it's important to have your policies written down—and not just written down, but make sure that they actually are pretty airtight in terms of what they dictate regarding behavior. Because ... and I don't know if this was a public library or an academic library. We were talking about that, and one of my classmates was actually telling a story about how [section omitted] they had a policy that dictated that you must wear a shirt and shoes. And so, they had a patron come in wearing a shirt and shoes and nothing else. And he got upset when they said you have to leave, and I think there was, I mean, the story I heard was there was a lawsuit involved eventually. So that sort of became an example of, you know, you need to be really clear in your policies. —Respondent 12

This story presents a clear didactic message about careful preparedness. It fosters a sense of mild paranoia that policies must be in place and must be very carefully written. When considered with the jokes about committees and micromanagement, it also demonstrates the amusing push and pull created by librarians' feeling of obligation to red tape. Many people complain about committees and policies, but they persist in most institutions.

Another recurrent theme in librarian cautionary tales relates to the patron who creates routine disturbances. In most of these instances, the patron creates a mild or serious nuisance for either the library's employees or patrons. The severity is higher than in cases like "Baby Bird's," where no one is harmed or unnerved. As in indoctrination tales regarding patrons, in each case, problematic individuals have been assigned simple, descriptive names that help library employees relate warnings about that person to each other when the person's real name is unknown.

There is the story of Body Parts Man. Body Parts Man, which I hear that he still does this, calls into reference and asks for the specific weights of human organs. Once, a friend of mine had an encounter with Body Parts Man and after she was able to answer how much a human eyeball weighs, he asked her if she thought that HER eyeball would weigh that much if it wasn't in her head anymore. —Respondent 17

\* \* \*

There used to be this really heavysset guy who I would call The Leaner, because if there was a woman sitting across from him he would sort of sit—and this guy was like 300 pounds—he'd just sort of be going like this [leaning]. —Respondent 5

\* \* \*

The Egg Man ... was actually very nice, not a problem patron. However, he was fairly pale, large, bald, and rounded. Pretty much looked like an egg. The library where I worked at the time had a couple of larger public computer labs, and three private carrels with PCs. He always signed up for a private carrel, and he was rather aromatic, so patrons who came after him would complain bitterly about the smell in the carrel and force us to hose it down with deodorizer. Since he was such a nice person, I always suspected that he signed up for the carrel, to not subject everyone in the large labs to the smell. —Respondent 17

\* \* \*

I actually don't know anyone that saw The Shoe Violator, but a library GA [graduate assistant] relayed this story to me from a library faculty member. Apparently, students (female) on the study floors of the library used to just take off their shoes while they studied. Some of these students would apparently just wander off into the stacks to look for more books and just leave their shoes. The Shoe Violator would apparently steal



girls' shoes and they were found later, having been "used" for his weird foot fetish fantasies. —Respondent 13

\* \* \*

I have one story about a couple in a study room.... I did get this second hand from a previous colleague. The story was that the study rooms in this library had closed doors, I mean, opaque doors, and didn't have windows, as far as I can recall, or they may have had very small windows, but they didn't have glass walls, so there was a great deal of privacy in the study room. And there was apparently a couple that was being very vocally amorous in one of the study rooms and one of my colleagues had to go knock on the door and interrupt them, and they were embarrassed and left the library. —Respondent 1

Stories like these form a point of reference for employees, but they also facilitate bonding between service point staffers who must work with the same problematic patron (or with other similar patrons at other libraries).

In some cautionary tales, the interviewee describes how a librarian took charge and resolved the situation in heroic fashion—these stories contain elements of the traditional folkloric hero tale. In library hero tales, our image as helpers and solvers of problems is emphasized, and listeners presumably take away the message that they too can effect positive change in their libraries through attentiveness, action, and assertiveness. When library patrons share stories of assault (physical or sensory) in libraries, the underlying message is that one must be careful, even in spaces that are perceived as safe. This is a regularly recurrent theme in urban legends.

One especially relevant hero tale relates the story of a library employee who was terminated due to erratic behavior and, in response, ran through the building threatening the safety of others and threatening to take his own life. Two employees of the same library reported on this event (Story 1 and 2). In the first version, the point of the story is the event itself, which is a simple anecdote or cautionary tale. In the second version, the story has evolved to include a much more dramatic hero element, where a brave librarian saves the day.

### Story 1

They eventually talked him [the angry employee] down and got it all sorted. [section omitted.] But later on, about two years later, my old boss who was involved in all this heard somebody at a conference talking about it. It's like "have you heard that crazy story about that crazy guy who went insane and was knocking books down and then took himself hostage?" And so she heard it as a legendary story, and she had experienced it. —Respondent 5

\* \* \*

### Story 2

In subsequent years the story morphed considerably so that one day, going into the break lounge to get my lunch out, I overheard a variation of the story in which [an employee] had wrestled the young man to the ground and disarmed him, although he wasn't named—some unknown heroic librarian had apparently wrestled the young man to the ground. I have no idea if the story is still told—I suspect that it is—but I was there and I can tell you there was no bodily contact between any librarians and the young man. —Respondent 8

This story is, like much folklore, dynamic in nature and has evolved to better deliver an inspirational message about librarian bravery and heroism.

Another common thread in academic librarians' indoctrination/cautionary tales covers our interactions with the homeless. The following stories, shared by five individuals at the same institution, demonstrate how a single incident can spawn years of discussion when it strikes a cultural nerve. The accuracy and origins of the story line are unclear, but it had been oft-repeated and was widely known. Respondents reported first hearing about the event(s) in the 1990s or early 2000s, so at the time of the interviews, the details had been in circulation for well over a decade.

I don't know if this is at [university] or if it was someplace else, but I think that there's some folk tale, um ... some student

that would just live off Ramen noodles and lived up in the ceiling. That's all I know really, is that there's somebody that lived in the ceiling tiles, and that maybe somebody pushed open one and was able to see that there's this box of Ramen, or something like that. There was food left up there, and so that's what made people wonder about it, but that would have been before my time too, 'cause I really think I would have sought that one out if it had happened while I was there. — Respondent 4

\* \* \*

All I know is that I've heard coworkers talk about people sleeping or hiding in an attic I didn't even know we had. This was so long ago, but someone may have said the police found someone up there at one point. How they would get up there in the first place is a mystery to me. —Respondent 27

\* \* \*

Apparently at some point there had been a foreign student who had lost his funding, or housing, and had essentially moved into the library. (I want to say he was Chinese or at least from Asia, but that could be faulty memory.) He avoided the security guards at closing time by hiding, and was stashing his stuff—clothing, toothbrush, etc.—in the ceiling tiles of one of the men's rooms. —Respondent 1

\* \* \*

There was supposedly a guy who lived on the Library 9th floor. He was supposedly a student from China who couldn't afford housing. [section omitted] The story was that this student from China came by and couldn't afford housing, so while he was here doin' graduate work he lived on the 9th floor and everybody just sorta looked the other way. [section omitted] [This happened] Just sometime in the past. [section omitted] I've

heard that one so often and so long that I couldn't pinpoint a person where that had come from. —Respondent 5

\* \* \*

When I first came to work here in 2005, I was warned to always check the ceiling tiles in the bathrooms as I went into the stalls, because homeless people lived up in the ceilings and had been caught peeping on the girls in the bathrooms. The person who told me said that everyone in the building knew about this issue because ceiling tiles had been found askew, and because packages of ramen noodles and other food had been found up there. I still checked those tiles for the first few months I was here. —Respondent 26

This case is particularly interesting because it shows how stories like this one change gradually over time to better deliver a cautionary, image-related, or educational message. The story evolved from a general anecdote into a pointed cautionary tale wherein our helplessness to stop the invasion of our libraries by the homeless is stressed—for Respondent 26, the point of the retelling was to protect her from the potential for workplace assault. Every individual interviewed from this institution knew about the homeless person or people who had allegedly lived in the ceiling, and it had become a cultural touchstone.

Respondents from several other academic libraries had similar tales about homeless people finding shelter in library stairwells, closets, or ceilings. The indication is that this is a concern in many institutions.

There was a rumor that a homeless man was able to reside in the ceiling of the library for a few weeks before anyone realized that he was there. —Respondent 13

\* \* \*

I did once hear that there was a homeless man living in a rarely used stairwell behind the department I currently work in. He

had set up fairly extensive housekeeping there before he was discovered and evicted. I've never established if this was true or not. —Respondent 17

\* \* \*

We did twice have a guy living in an electrical closet in the library, making the staff think they had a ghost until he was discovered (before the renovations when more door locks were added). —Respondent 22

In the first and second scenarios above, the librarians openly expressed unsurety about the veracity of the stories, but repeated them anyway. In all three stories, the tellers' sense of security was restored by library employees who were able to take action by finding and ejecting the unlawful tenants. So, rather than these tales being solely cautionary in nature, they are also hero tales, wherein the librarian or university employee is presented as solving a serious problem in the building. (Though they are not included for space reasons, thematically similar tales about patrons who engage in loud or public sexual relations in the library came up repeatedly. In many cases, these liaisons were noted as being disrespectful of other patrons, and the librarian had to step in to protect the other patrons and restore order.)

Another notable cautionary trend relates to our fear that libraries and librarians are perceived as obsolete or behind the times. In some cases, we chastise ourselves for failing to keep up with the changes in the world. This lightbulb joke highlights the theme:

Q: How many academic librarians does it take to change a lightbulb?

A: CHANGE?!?!?!

In at least one case, the concept of the library as an out-of-date institution is reflected not only in the stories of librarians, but in the folklore of the wider world: the infamous story of the library with the sinking founda-



tion has become legend at many universities and is repeated by librarians, faculty, and students alike. According to the story, Library X is reportedly sinking into the ground because builders failed to take into account the weight of the books when building or because of some other structural deficiency. One librarian reported hearing this story:

The main library tower at [University Library] is sinking 1 inch every year because when the architects designed the library, they didn't take into account the weight of the books, so the foundation couldn't support it. Of course, this is not only false, but is a fairly common one across other academic libraries. [The university's] main library is sitting on top of a sheet of limestone, so it's not going anywhere. —Respondent 21

The legend of the sinking library is documented on the popular urban legend documentation site Snopes.com. Their site says

I have heard from several different people claiming that their alma mater (or someone else's) built a library but did not factor in the weight of the books. After the building was completed and the books were added, the building began to sink. Now, the university can only put books on every other floor, or something like that.<sup>11</sup>

Stacey Hathaway-Bell also found evidence of this legend in her article, "Satan's Shelving: Urban Library Legends." She says of her own experience, "Legends of sinking libraries are widely disseminated and often believed by patrons and librarians alike. I distinctly remember hearing about a sinking library at least once during library school and I had no reason to disbelieve the tale because it is plausible."<sup>12</sup>

The Snopes essay on the topic notes that "though a few libraries have experienced settling problems, none of them was the result of an addle-brained architect who left out the key calculation regarding the weight of the library's holdings.... So far, the 'weight of the books' explanation has failed to hold up about any library it's been told about (and the list is almost endless)."<sup>13</sup>

While this story does not make a direct statement about library obsolescence, the tie-in is clear: the library sinks slowly but inexorably under the weight of its archaic, heavy paper books. The “experts” who planned the library made a fundamental strategic error, and it’s too late to correct it. If only the library would catch up and purchase more electronic content, perhaps this problem could be solved—but that does not happen in any of the legends. The library simply sinks and molders.

Concern over the public’s general perception of the import of librarians appeared in a few other ways in the interviews. Some individuals expressed their concern pointedly:

It seems the general public has a skeptical view of how important libraries are in our society. When a doctor of mine found out I was working in a library, his comment was “How sweet. You know, those aren’t going to be around for much longer.” And people sometimes look puzzled when I say I am getting a degree in library science. It could be the term “library science” which is puzzling, but it could also be they think “why go into something that antiquated.” —Respondent 16

Another individual commented that a family member teased his decision to pursue a master of library science degree:

I’ve had someone demean the value of my master’s degree before. My sister said she didn’t understand why I got a Master’s degree to learn how to shelve books. She was trying to be funny, but it kinda hurt my feelings at the time. —Respondent 31

The open Web is also rife with librarian-written blog posts, articles, and debates about the continued relevance of libraries and librarians. Anecdotally, most librarians seem to believe that libraries are not obsolete (though they may need to adapt and change with the world), but these interviews and web posts show that librarians harbor concern that the public, university/college officials, and lawmakers will find libraries irrelevant and dated. Many respondents indicated a sense of sadness or frustration that our students and the public do not perceive libraries as relevant and

that library spaces are disrespected or even damaged by a small percentage of patrons and librarians. Libraries around the world are combating fears of our pending demise through a variety of creative means, but our sense of concern about the image of libraries has not yet been fully assuaged.

## Behavior-Governing Stories

Through lore, librarians establish their own heroes—brave individuals who handle problem patrons or manage physical threats caused by patrons or other employees—but they also tell tales of individuals who fail to uphold the professional group image. Often, the exploits of poorly behaved librarians are discussed among colleagues, and these discussions create a normative standard for behavior. They serve as professional cautionary tales that help us to determine what is and is not appropriate. Some of the interviewees shared stories like these, which focused on unacceptable dress, unsuitable break-time activities (or break length), and a public failure of temper control:

This particular library assistant is what we'd fondly call a character. She often wore unusual or inappropriate clothes to work, and one of her more outlandish outfits was a swimsuit, cover-up, and flip flops. This was during the time when flip flops were typically only worn to the beach or pool. Sometimes, she'd wear a swimsuit and beach towel wrapped around her waist. During lunch breaks, she'd sun herself on the quad. —Respondent 19

\* \* \*

I used to hear that there was a reference librarian who [section omitted] would fall asleep under the table [in one of the library's classrooms] as a way to take a break from the day. So you might go in there to use it and all of a sudden you see these just two legs stickin' out from under the table. —Respondent 5

\* \* \*

I remember shortly after I started my first professional reference job that I noticed that a particular librarian worked on the

reference desk but never taught any bibliographic instruction sessions. I asked around and was told by several people that she had been removed from her teaching duties after she “freaked out” in the middle of a session. Apparently a student had been rude and then questioned her authority and she ended up yelling profanities at the student. I don’t think that the story ever left our library (since it would reflect poorly on the whole library), but everyone there knew what had happened. I never confirmed the exact details of the story, but the message was clear—no matter how much students push your buttons, don’t lose your cool! —Respondent 31

In these cases, repetition of cautionary behavior tales gives peers a chance to distance themselves from and, hopefully, prevent such behaviors in newcomers. Distancing via incredulity and in some cases mockery is common of any folk group, but in libraries, individuals who behave in questionable ways may meet with an especially strong response. Since librarians are concerned not only with their image, but with the future of the institution of libraries, they may worry that a librarian who seems to have no work or who is unfriendly will further damage our perceived relevance.

## Conclusion

Librarian folklore shows what we strive for, what concerns we share, and what we find most important in our work lives. More than just providing interesting anecdotes, folklore analysis can lead to improved professional and psychological insight and improved interpersonal communication. Librarians’ informal shared stories illuminate our fears and concerns, and they underpin and deepen our sense of professional self. The folklore collected in this study shows that librarians place a high value on their role as protectors. Librarian folktales consistently highlight librarians’ efforts to protect information access, fairness, quality service, the future of libraries, and the physical and emotional safety of patrons. This study also gives us a more human basis for declarations that appear in formalized vision statements and policies. For example, librarian folklore reflects a clear congruence with the values formally outlined in the American Library As-

sociation's "Core Values of Librarianship": access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, while we may talk and joke about ourselves and occasionally about the people we serve, these utterances do not generally reflect mockery, but rather a sense of affection and caring. Folklore studies like this one are often conducted for analysis by folklorists, but the findings can also be used by the group's members to gain a better sense of their professional zeitgeist and communication modes and, ultimately, to assess the deeper messages that are carried in both idle and professional talk. Folk stories can strengthen the bond between librarians everywhere, and create a stronger sense of community.

## Notes

1. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1998).
2. Alan Dundes, foreword to *Folklore and Psychoanalysis*, by Paulo de Carvalho-Neto (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1968), 9.
3. Robin Croft, "Folklore, Families and Fear: Exploring the Influence of the Oral Tradition on Consumer Decision-Making," *Journal of Marketing Management* 22, no. 9/10 (November 2006): 1053.
4. Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 231.
5. Linda S. Watts, *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 423.
6. Simon J. Bronner, *Piled Higher and Deeper* (Little Rock, AR: August House, 1990); J. Barre Toelken, *The Folklore of Academe*, in Brunvand, *Study of American Folklore*.
7. Stacy Hathaway-Bell, "Satan's Shelving: Urban Library Legends," *American Libraries* 29, no. 7 (1998): 44-49.
8. Carolyn S. Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 2.
9. Judith Kerman, "The Light-Bulb Jokes: Americans Look at Social Action Processes," *Journal of American Folklore* 93, no. 370 (October-December 1980): 455, [www.jstor.org/stable/539876](http://www.jstor.org/stable/539876).
10. Ibid.
11. "That Sinking Feeling," Snopes.com, last modified June 23, 2011, [www.snopes.com/college/halls/sinking.asp](http://www.snopes.com/college/halls/sinking.asp)
12. Hathaway-Bell, "Satan's Shelving," 45.
13. "That Sinking Feeling."
14. "Core Values of Librarianship," American Library Association, adopted June 29, 2004, [www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues).



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